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SUBJECT: LEBANON: PM SINIORA SUPPORTS CONINUED NEGOTIATIONS
ON EASTERN BORDER SECURITY INITIATIVE

REF: BEIRUT 1272

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) During an October 10 meeting with the Ambassador, Prime Minister Siniora expressed his desire to continue discussions on the EU proposal for enhanced security on the eastern border with Syria. During Siniora's recent visits to regional capitals, he found, to his surprise, that the Emir of Qatar was the most enthusiastic potential regional partner on this issue. Siniora urged the U.S. to broach this subject with the Qataris, as well. Siniora looks forward to the upcoming joint visit of the Spanish, French and Italian Foreign Ministers to pursue the topic and he thinks that momentum should be continued despite the current domestic focus on presidential election issues. Decrying those who want to table the proposal until after Lebanon's presidential and governmental transition, Siniora agreed that it would be ideal to present a new proposal as a "fait accompli" to the incoming government. End Summary.

PM Expresses Renewed Enthusiasm for Expanded Border Mission

2. (C) During a multi-topic conversation (septel), PM Siniora was jovial, relaxed and treated the Ambassador, Special Assistant, and PolOff to a series of anecdotes, jokes and even a few parables to illustrate his points. During this session, he displayed more interest and enthusiasm for border security issues than we have seen in recent weeks.

3. (C) Siniora said that it was time to revive conversations about a combined European and Arab border security initiative to address the continued problems on the eastern border. Siniora recently visited a number of countries in the region and said that he had raised this specific issue with Egypt, Qatar, Kuwait, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Admitting that he was surprised by the constructive attitude, Siniora said that the Emir of Qatar was particularly supportive of a new initiative. While Siniora questioned whether Qatar (seen here as a shameless apologist for Syria and Hizballah) might have some more sinister ulterior motives, he urged the U.S. to follow up with Qatari officials to develop this interest into concrete commitments for cooperation. Siniora also found it significant that, in his conversations in Doha, the Qataris had lowered the volume of what he described as their usual complaints about Saudi Arabia.

14. (C) Turning to the Europeans, Siniora stated that he has also spoken with France, Germany, Portugal and Italy about the EU proposal. Siniora welcomes the upcoming joint visit of French FM Kouchner, Spanish FM Moratinos and Italian FM D'Alema, who will be in Beirut October 19-20. Siniora promised to make the border security initiative one of his top agenda items during the visit and he will continue to stress the GOL's strong preference for a "pay up front" approach when dealing with the Syrians. Siniora wants the EU to agree that Syria, as a sign of good will, should seal the section of the border abutting the PFLP-GC military bases of Qosaya and Helwa, withdrawing Syrian support for those bases.

Moving Forward Realistically

15. (C) Siniora was well aware of the delayed start date for the German Northern Border Pilot Project (NBPP), but was quick to point out, "The delays are not because of us!" He said the NBPP will address some of the smuggling issues in the north, which for the most part consist of commercial smuggling, not arms trafficking. Siniora told us that the northern area is much easier to protect and, with the end of the Nahr al-Barid conflict, illegal arms are no longer being directed to that region.

16. (C) When asked whether, as some propose, he agreed that this issue could not be addressed effectively under after the presidential election season, Siniora emphatically said, "No. It is important to continue momentum." His response was the most forceful we have seen on this issue in a number of weeks. Siniora wants to continue working with international

BEIRUT 00001584 002 OF 002

partners to develop plans for this initiative so that a new government will inherit the program as a "fait accompli."

17. (C) In a separate conversation with the Special Assistant and PolOff, the PM's Advisor, Ambassador Mohammad Chatah, said that this EU joint FM visit comes at an ideal time. He is eager to see how they progress with the Syrians on this issue, but he is confident that their conclusions will take the GOL's concerns into account. He did note that, although the Germans seem to want to take the lead in coordinating a future mission, they are the most conservative in terms of defining a mission, preferring "mentors" to "monitors."

Comment

18. (C) We were pleasantly surprised by Siniora's attention to the border issue. In recent weeks, he has in general adopted a passive attitude about many things. suggesting a "lame-duck" attitude toward his cabinet that, constitutionally, resigns with the start of the next presidential term. This week, however, he submitted a report to the UN that, while weaker than we would have liked, hints at Syrian and Hizballah links to armed activities in Lebanon, and he was more focused than usual on the border issue. While Siniora appeared both mystified and intrigued by the reported new Qatari interest in the border issue, we agree with him that it is worth exploring this. An Arab element in border monitoring would make the entire effort harder to attack politically here. Siniora calculates that if Qatar becomes the front state for taking Siniora's proposal to the Arab League, it is also more difficult for Syria to say no.
FELTMAN